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ABSTRACT

A set of specific and practical ideas for teaching language skills are presented, centered around the use of charts or "squares" of pictures that represent ideas that can be expressed in basic English. The focus is a story square, a system of pictures tied together by a plot and presented to the class as a puzzle. Squares for pronunciation can be used to help increase the ability to aurally distinguish and orally produce sounds that are often confused. Squares have been devised to contrast the present perfect, the simple past, and the "going to" forms of verbs. The story square involves three phases: discovering the story, asking simple questions based on the square, and using the square to deal with more complex structures. For lower-level classes, the plot can be streamlined to include only the essentials, and drills are chosen to meet student needs. From a basic plot, details and embellishments can be added depending on the level of the class. A square that has been used successfully with an advanced class is presented. It is concluded that the goal of the story square is to help enhance students' cooperative learning skills, to help them master basic grammar, and to improve their fluency. (SW)

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STORY SQUARES

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This article presents a set of specific and practical ideas for teaching language skills, centered around the use of charts or "squares" of pictures which represent ideas that can be expressed in basic English. The focus of the article is the Story Square, a system of pictures tied together by a plot and presented to the class as a puzzle. The Story Square is an idea that has been developed at the Language Institute of Japan by Lance Knowles and myself during the past year, and used in the classroom with considerable success. The squares included in this article are only examples, but I hope they will be of assistance to those teachers who would like to create their own.

I would like to begin by tracing the development of the Story Square. My first primitive picture squares were inspired by a print-out describing a verbal problem-solving approach used by Alexander Lipson at Harvard University. One component of this approach was the Lipson Square: by replacing words and phrases with representative symbols, Lipson "pointed out" ideas that could be expressed in grammatical English. By building on this vocabulary of symbols, he could present the class with a plot of extreme intricacy. Step two of his method involved asking questions about the plot, the complexity of which commanded the students' total concentration.

Lipson probably would not recognize his own inspiration in my first primitive picture squares, but the idea of the symbols appealed to me immensely, to the extent that the idea of plot was at first overlooked. This was because pictures had a way of removing both the written word and me as the teacher as the focus of the students' attention. As I worked with the pictures, various mutations evolved from the original idea; for example, Pronunciation Squares, Squares for the Contrasting of Tenses, and Squares for Specific Devious Purposes, all of which proved extremely useful and interesting in and of themselves, but which became stages in the evolution of the Story Square. As such, they require brief explanations.

SQUARES FOR PRONUNCIATION

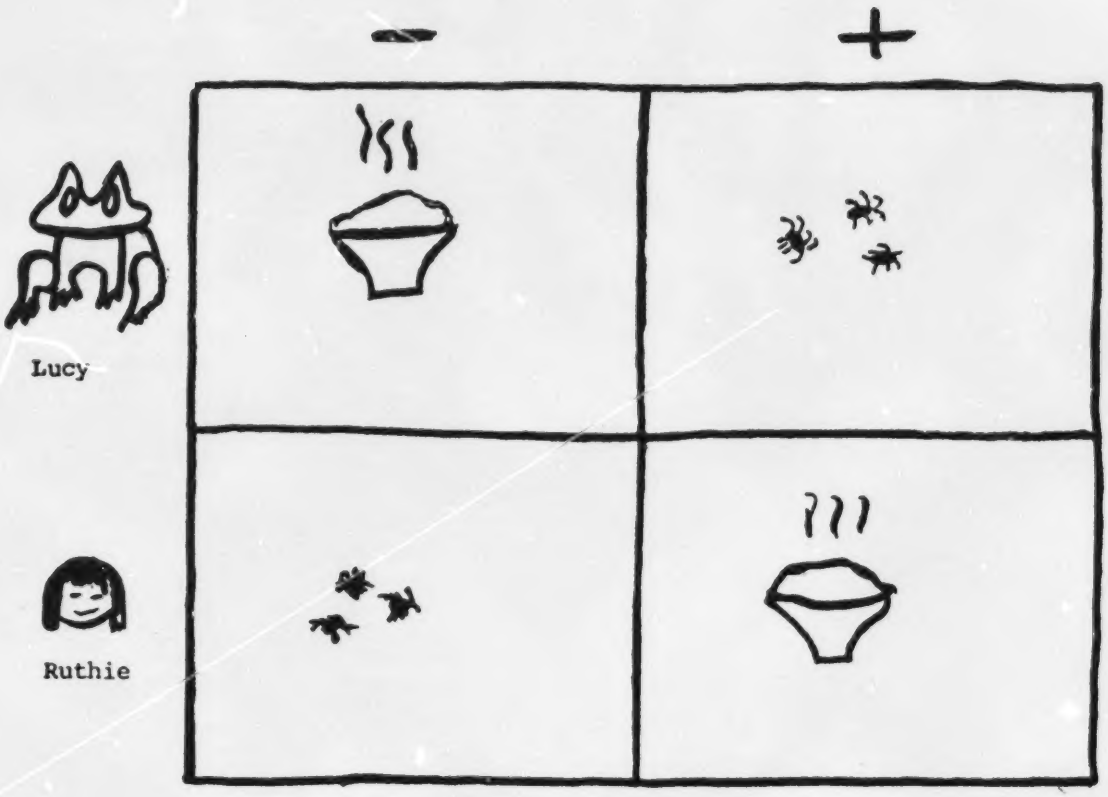
These can be used to help increase students' ability both to aurally distinguish and orally produce sounds which are often confused. The following square is drawn on the board: (See Figure 1)

First, the characters are introduced. The teacher points to the frog, saying, "This is Lucy," then to the girl, saying, "This is Ruthie." Then, pointing to each square in turn, the teacher introduces the basic sentences orally:

1. Lucy doesn't like rice.
2. Lucy likes lice.
3. Ruthie doesn't like lice.
4. Ruthie likes rice.

Now the teacher may ask questions, e.g., "Does Lucy like rice?", calling on the

FIGURE 1



Basic sentences: Lucy doesn't like rice. Lucy likes lice.
Ruthie doesn't like lice. Ruthie likes rice.

?/Who/What/-?/tag

students to answer ("No, she doesn't.") When they understand the process, the teacher can have the students ask the questions. Some teachers write cue words or symbols on the board, especially for lower-level classes; for example, the question mark "?" for making a question from a statement, and "-?" for a negative question.

The following are some possibilities for drill:

1. Making questions from statements:
   "Does Ruthie like lice?" "No, she doesn't."

2. Asking negative questions:
   "Doesn't Lucy like rice?" "No, she doesn't."

3. Asking tag questions:
   "Ruthie likes lice, doesn't she?" "No, she doesn't."
   "Lucy doesn't like rice, does she?" "No, she doesn't."

4. Asking questions using question words:
   "What does Lucy like?" "She likes lice."
   "What doesn't Lucy like?" "She doesn't like rice."
   "Who likes rice?" "Ruthie does."
   "Who doesn't like lice?" "Ruthie doesn't."

The sentences are short and simple so fluency can be stressed. Working with the square can be preceded by work with minimal pairs, during which the students can practice distinguishing sounds aurally, then producing them; in this case, the square acts as a sort of test of how much they have benefited from the preceding lesson. Some teachers prefer to reverse the process, presenting the square first, and then turning to minimal pair drill if/when the square work reveals students' inadequacies. The square thus provides a meaningful context for the minimal pair drill, as the drill gives them intensive work in a problem area revealed to them by the square. They can then wind up the lesson by returning to the square.

SQUARES FOR THE CONTRASTING OF TENSES

The square in Figure 2 was devised for the purpose of contrasting the present perfect, the simple past, and the "going to" forms of verbs. Again, the square is drawn on the board and the basic sentences are introduced orally:

Basic sentences:

This morning, Bev read the newspaper.

Tonight she's going to practice karate.

This morning, Bob went jogging.

Tonight he's going to take a bath.

This morning Kathy brushed her teeth.

Tonight she's going to go to a party.

FIGURE 2

With lower-level classes, it's a good idea to spend some time drilling the basic sentences by asking questions, e.g., "What's Kathy going to do tonight?", or by pointing to a square and having a student ask a question corresponding to that square. With higher-level classes this step can be skipped, and the drill can proceed directly to the present perfect. It might go something like this:

Has Bev read the paper yet?

Yes, she has.

When did she read it?

This morning.

Has Bob taken a bath yet?

No, he hasn't.

When's he going to take one?

Tonight.

After these forms have been mastered by the class, the square can be embellished to include the present continuous, present perfect continuous, and prepositions of time, by adding a "now" row of pictures and times.[1] (See Figure 3)

Basic sentences:

Bev is watching television.

Bob is eating dinner.

Kathy is taking a nap.

Now the drill can be expanded to include the questions:

Has Kathy taken a nap yet?

She's taking one now.

How long has she been sleeping?

She's been sleeping since 6:00.

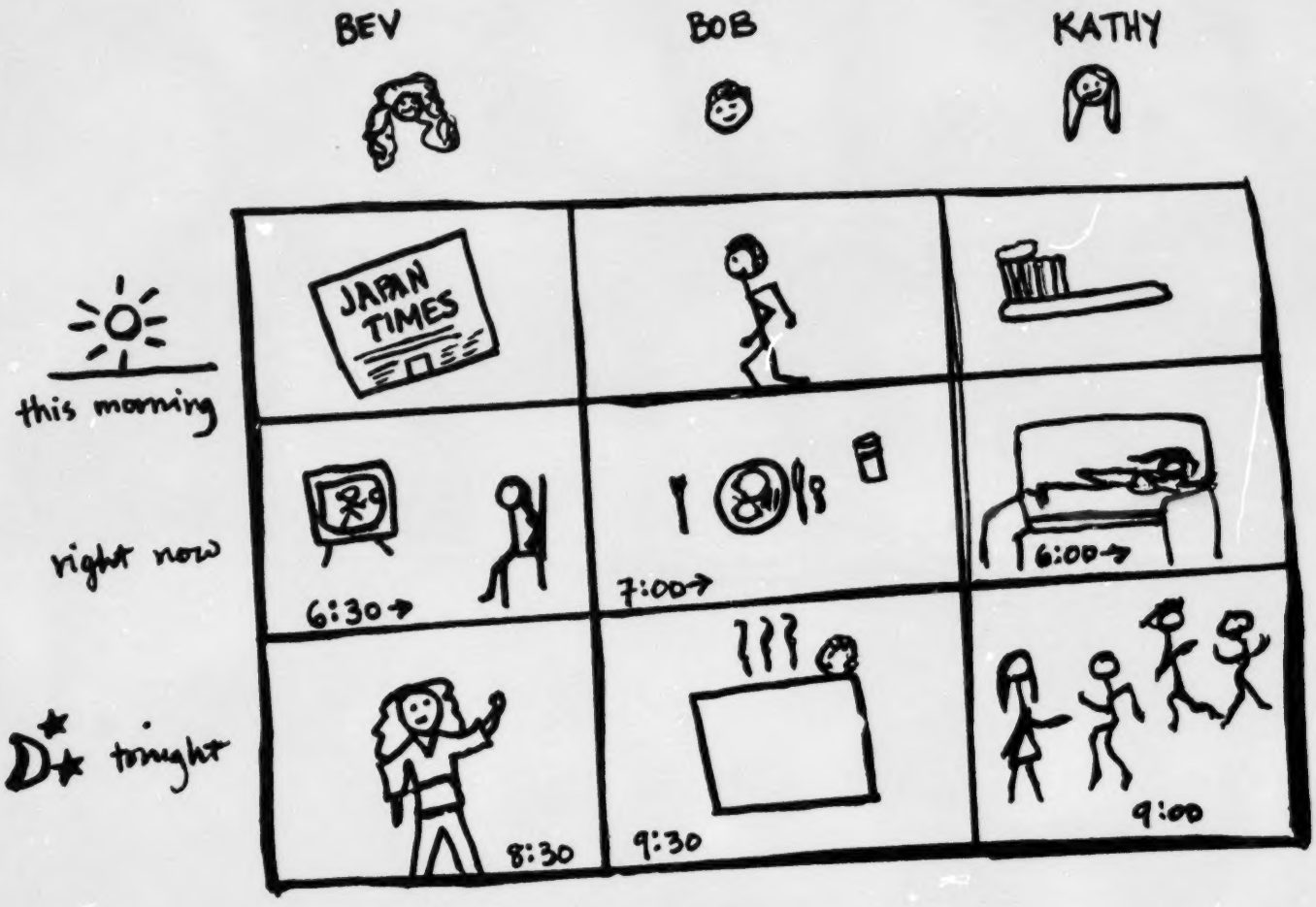
(If it is now 8:00 in the class):

She's been sleeping for two hours.

---

[1] This particular square was designed for an English class that met in the evenings from 7 to 8:30, in an attempt to assign real meaning to differences in English verb forms. A student must remember what time it is at the moment he is sitting in class answering, and the answers depend on the actual time; therefore answers will change as time passes, lending a real, dynamic nature to the drill.

FIGURE 3


BEV
BOB
KATHY
this morning
right now
tonight
JAPAN TIMES
6:30
7:00
6:00
8:30
9:30
9:00

When did she start taking a nap?

She started taking a nap at 6:00/two hours ago.

When's Bev going to practice karate?

She's going to practice karate at 8:30/in half an hour.

SQUARES FOR SPECIFIC DEVIOUS PURPOSES

We have seen how these picture squares can be tailored to deal with specific pronunciation problems as well as general confusion of tenses. They can also be designed around any subject, no matter how specific, that a teacher might want to teach. For example, Figure 4 drills the use of conjunctions, such as "because," "so that," as well as giving practice handling sentences with multiple prepositional phrases. The primary purpose of this square is grammatical, but it should be noted that squares can be devised for purposes other than grammar; e.g. for vocabulary or differentiation of word forms (for example, "record" as either a noun or verb; or the endings of "economy," "economic," "economical," and "economist").

THE STORY SQUARE

All of the squares discussed so far could be used only once or for a limited period of time in the classroom. The one-shot nature of these squares seems to be suited to the ones designed to tackle pronunciation problems or specific problems in word usage. However, for more general purposes, my early squares began to seem grossly inadequate. For example, in the squares used for the contrasting of tenses, only a very limited number of concepts could be dealt with. The square was essentially no different from a wall chart, or other information presented pictorially, and its function seemed limited to the drilling of certain patterns. There was nothing to engage the students' interest other than the grammar itself, which was not always compelling enough to sustain high-level motivation.

Seeking something more comprehensive that could be used over a longer period of time, Lance Knowles, my teaching partner, decided to somehow relate all the pictures in a square to each other by imposing a plot of some sort. So we tried it on a square (see Figure 5) which was originally designed for the purpose of contrasting the simple past, present habitual, and present continuous tenses.

Basic sentences:

Ru usually drinks Budweiser Beer.

Yesterday she drank two bottles of California wine and a martini.

Right now she's drinking orange juice.

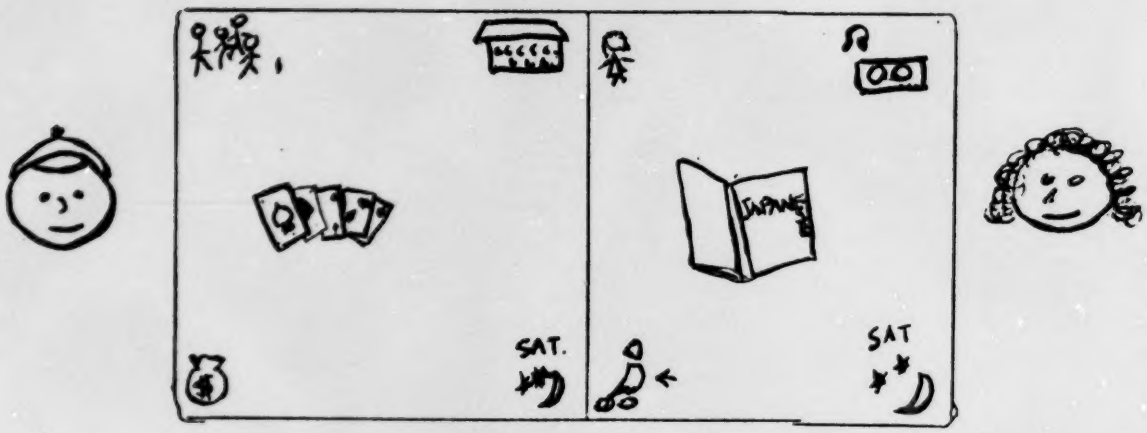
Patty usually studies at the University of California.

Yesterday she was kidnapped by radicals.

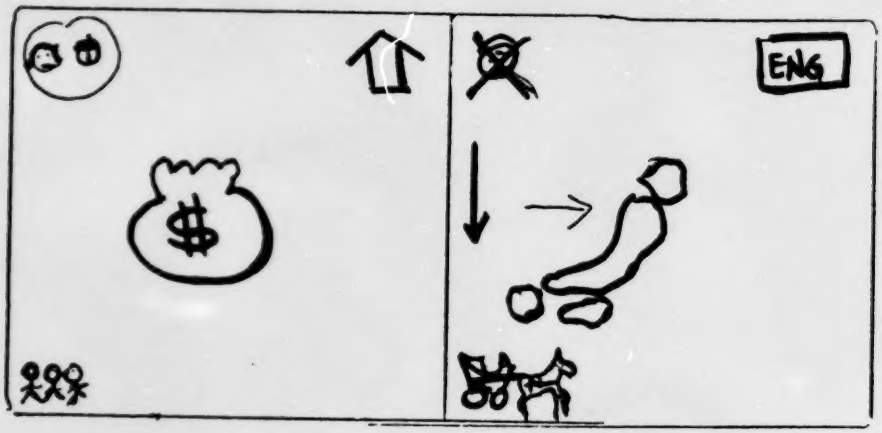
Right now she's robbing a bank.

Lou usually drives a taxi in San Francisco.

FIGURE 4



John plays poker with his friends in the dormitory on Saturday night.
Mary studies Japanese alone in the language laboratory on Sat. night.
(They are in love; they are both students).
John plays poker because he wants to win money, and Mary studies Japanese because she wants to go to Japan.



John wants to win money to buy a house, so that he can marry Mary.
Mary wants to go to Japan to teach English so that she can forget John.

John wants to get married because he wants children.
Mary wants to forget John because he's too old-fashioned.

Yesterday he drove some passengers from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

Now he's taking a vacation in Palm Springs.

The square in its original state presented certain chronological information about three seemingly unrelated characters. From this, we created the following plot:

> *Ru and Patty are both students of U.C. Berkeley, but they don't know each other. They both live in Berkeley. Ru is Lou's girlfriend, but they have a very unstable relationship. Yesterday Patty was kidnapped by radicals, who are planning to demand a ransom from her rich father. The radicals and Patty escaped to Los Angeles by engaging Lou's taxi in San Francisco. Lou didn't realize who his passengers were. After being paid a huge fare in L.A., Lou decided on the spur of the moment to take a vacation in nearby Palm Springs. He telephoned Ru to tell her of his plans. Ru was very depressed when she heard that Lou was going to take a vacation without her, so she drank too much. Now she's drinking orange juice because she has a hangover from drinking too much yesterday. The bank that Patty is robbing is in Los Angeles. It is not clear whether Patty is being forced to rob the bank or acting of her own accord.*

Lance then came up with the idea of presenting the square as a puzzle, giving the class only the information provided in the original basic sentences, and having them elicit the story by asking the teacher yes-no questions; and thus the Story Square has evolved into three phases: 1) Discovering the story, 2) Asking simple questions based on the square, for fluency, and 3) Using the square to deal with more complex structures.

PHASE I

The square should be drawn on the flip-side of the blackboard in order to save the trouble of having to redraw it every day. It can also be drawn on large posterboard or paper.

First, the basic sentences are introduced orally to the class. Again, with a lower-level class, it might be a good idea to spend some time reviewing the basic sentences, having the students ask and answer simple "what" and "who" questions on the information given. Then when the class understands the basic information, they should be told that there is a story connecting Ru, Patty and Lou, and that they must find out what the story is by asking the teacher questions that can be answered with a "Yes" or "No". Typical first questions might be: "Does Patty know Ru?" "Are Patty and Lou married?" "Does Ru live in San Francisco?" If a question is asked the answer to which is not provided by the plot or is irrelevant, the teacher should answer, "I don't know." An example of this kind of question is: "Does Lou like beer?"

Students will invariably make mistakes in phrasing their questions, and those mistakes are the core of the lesson. Classes soon come to learn that the more they attempt, the more mistakes they make, but also the more they learn. Students usually find that they can communicate better if they concentrate on asking simple questions, rather than monstrous concoctions that cannot be untangled or deciphered either by class or teacher. As confidence with basic sentences increases, students soon attempt more difficult structures.

Teachers should insist on accuracy, depending on the level of the class. In an advanced class, a question such as "Did Patty ride on Lou's taxi?" should be answered truthfully (no), but the teacher should caution the class to be very sure that the questions they are asking are indeed the questions they are intending to ask. One word can change the meaning of a question entirely, thereby causing confusion and leading the class onto the wrong track. Patty rode in Lou's taxi, not on it. Misunderstandings of this sort should be dealt with immediately.

When grammatical errors are made (e.g., "Does Ru living in Berkeley?"), the teacher should indicate that something is wrong and encourage the class to examine the structure and resubmit it. The whole class can thus be involved in the process of generating correct English sentences for the purpose of obtaining much-desired information; in short, communication. Often the meaning of a question can be understood despite mistakes in grammar. In that case, it is encouraging to the student if the teacher indicates that the meaning is understood, but that, nevertheless, he should try again for accuracy.

If a mistake cannot be corrected by the class, the teacher can explain it immediately or make a note of it and deal with it later in depth. Major errors which completely impede communication should by all means be dealt with, but minor errors which do not interfere with meaning can be overlooked or quickly corrected in a lower-level class.

It is an important part of the process to stop the questions about the story every so often and have the students summarize everything they have managed to find out. Communication among the students is vital; if they aren't listening to each other, different students will keep asking the same questions and it will take them longer to figure out the story. If it becomes apparent that the students as a group are operating under a certain misapprehension, the teacher should intervene by challenging it and having the students ask questions to straighten it out.

PHASE II

Phase II consists of fluency drills based on the story. By now, we assume that the class understands the story one-hundred percent. Any class member, if called upon, should be able to relate the story in its entirety. At this point, the students can take turns asking each other questions, beginning with the question words. We focus first on one word, sometimes spending as much as twenty minutes on "What" questions, for example. As students continue to ask "What" questions, the easiest questions are quickly dispensed with, and then the questions can become more difficult. For example, the first question might be "What is Patty doing?" After twenty minutes someone might think to ask, "What do the radicals want from Patty's father?"

The students must always answer truthfully. If they don't know an answer or the information is not provided, they should qualify their answer ("I'm not exactly sure, but...") and guess. It's important that the questions and answers do not deviate from the facts of the story, since the plot itself serves as a check on the meanings of questions and answers. It should be pointed out that this is not a test of their imaginations, but rather a means for expressing what they know, with accuracy and speed. Correction is handled as described in Phase I.

PHASE III

Phase III is an extension of Phase II, but at a more difficult level. Here we use the square to deal with words or structures that the students may have trouble understanding. Now that the list of question words has been covered in Phase II,

FIGURE 5

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Ru-Lou Story Square

we can continue down the line to words like "before," "after," etc. Even advanced students will sometimes try asking a question like: "What did Patty do before she is robbing a bank?" If they notice that this sentence doesn't sound quite right, they might try: "What did Patty do before she robbed the bank?" But, since Patty is robbing the bank now, another student might be able to supply the word "started", to help the student express his meaning: "What did Patty do before she started robbing the bank?"

At some point, a teacher might make a rule that the students must ask questions without using any names. This gets the class into relative clauses, with questic like: "What did the woman who usually drinks beer do yesterday?" Or, the students can be asked to make questions using two question words, e.g., "what" and "when": "What was Ru doing when Lou phoned her?"

Another illustration of how the square can be used is in dealing with the unreal. I have often found that students have been taught to deal with expressing unreal situations by memorizing formulas (second conditional, third conditional) rather than by understanding the meaning needing to be expressed by them. For example, one student had memorized the formula: "If I had gotten up earlier, I would've had time to eat breakfast." I had trouble convincing her that the following sentence is legitimate English: "If I had gotten up earlier, I wouldn't be starving now."

The advantage of using the Story Square to deal with such structures is obvious. Since the story is clearly understood by all, formulas fall by the wayside as connections are made between events happening at all points in time.

Looking at the square, the teacher can present certain real information in terms of the facts of the story, e.g.: "Ru's drinking orange juice because she has a hangover," and then challenge the class to speculate about what might (not) have happened or might (not) be happening in different circumstances. The response being elicited in this case is: "If Ru didn't have a hangover, she'd probably be drinking beer." How do we know? Because the story tells us that Ru usually drinks beer.

Further examples of real-to-unreal transformations:

Lou doesn't love Ru, so he's taking a vacation without her.

If he loved her, he wouldn't be taking a vacation without her.

Patty was kidnapped, so she didn't go to class.

If she hadn't been kidnapped, she would've gone to class.

Patty's father is rich, so she was kidnapped.

If her father weren't rich, she wouldn't have been kidnapped.

Patty was kidnapped, so she's not studying at U.C.

If Patty hadn't been kidnapped, she'd be studying at U.C.

---

1 second and third conditionals

Lou is taking a vacation in Palm Springs, so he isn't with Ru.

If he weren't taking a vacation in Palm Springs, he'd probably be with Ru.

A student trying to manipulate formulas may become confused, but if he concentrates instead on the meaning, he can work it out. Once the formation of such sentences is understood, the class can work on fluency.

We use the Story Square for three or four hours a week during a four-week term. Phase I usually takes a class two hours or so, depending on their level of ability, and we ususlly spread this time out over two days. In Phases II and III, we normally limit each period of use to forty minutes to an hour, but in Phase I, the class is generally so enthusiastic that they don't want to stop. Even quiet classes have been known to resort to shoving and pushing in order to make themselves heard over one another in the process of discovering the story. Classes may balk at the beginning of Phase II when they think the fun is over and the drilling begins, but we have usually found that the discovery of their linguistic limitations makes them appreciate the square as familiar territory on which they can practice new skills.

For lower-level classes, the plot can be streamlined to include only the essentials. Drills must be chosen to meet the students' needs. The lower-level classes will probably not yet deal with the unreal, but will need plenty of work with question words, words dealing with time relationships, simple gambits (e.g., "Do you know where Patty lives?"), etc.

For higher-level classes, the story can be embellished as much as one desires. For example, the plot can be expanded to include such details as the fact that Patty used to be a high school student; Ru used to drink Sapporo Beer before the yen increased in value and Sapporo became more expensive than Budweiser; Lou used to be a bus driver, up until five years ago. By the time he changed jobs he'd already met Ru. Now he's dissatisfied with his relationship, and while he's in Palm Springs he's going to look around for another woman.

The main thing to keep in mind when creating a Story Square is to keep the basic plot as simple as possible. From a basic plot, details and embellishments can be added depending on the level of the class. Students must be able to make the connections by asking yes-no questions.[1]

The following is a square that has proved to be successful with an advanced class: (See Figure 6)

Basic sentences:

Joan used to be a housewife.

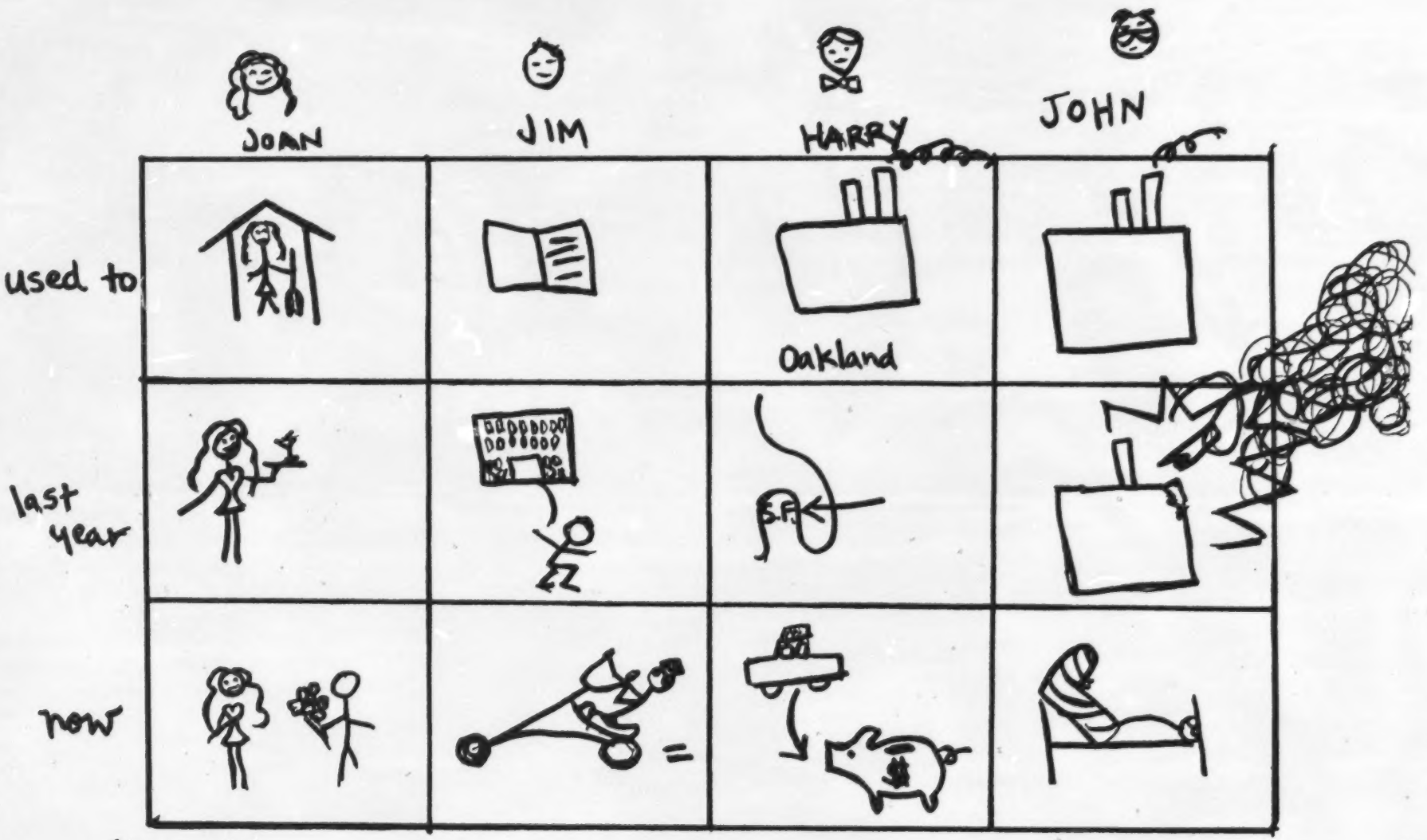
Last year she got a job as a cocktail waitress.

Now she's working six nights a week and has a new boyfriend.

---

[1] For example, I am now working on a square called "Murder on the Amtrak Express," based on an Agatha Christie mystery of a similar title. I gave it a trial run on a group of teachers, and they gave up after an hour of mounting frustration. Obviously, it will have to go through several stages of simplification before it can be used in the classroom.

FIGURE 6



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Jim used to be a high school student.

Last year he dropped out of school.

Now he's a member of a motorcycle gang.

Harry used to work at a factory in Oakland.

Last year he moved to San Francisco.

Now he drives a taxi in S.F. and is saving his money.

John used to work at a factory.

Last year he was injured in an explosion at the factory.

Now he's in the hospital.

The Story: Joan and John are married. Jim is their son. They live in Oakland, and the factory that John works at is also in Oakland. Harry used to work at the same factory. Harry and John were only casual acquaintances, but through John, Harry met Joan, and they began seeing each other behind John's back. Last year, Harry decided to take direct action and caused an explosion at the factory which injured John seriously. John is now in an Oakland hospital.

Harry was fired for negligence, and no one realized that his action had been deliberate. He moved to San Francisco after being fired and got a job as a taxi driver. He began to date Joan more openly, and he's trying to save his money so that he can convince her to divorce John and marry him.

When John was injured and couldn't work, Joan got a job as a cocktail waitress. Jimmy, without the benefit of parental guidance, and also troubled by his mother's affair, went astray, dropping out of school and joining a motorcycle gang.

This square, as well as being linguistically full of possibilities, contains a wealth of cultural information that can lead to questions and discussions; e.g., about divorce, child-raising, disability policies of American-based companies, etc. Teachers can design story squares based on any number of specific topics. Squares can also be based on true events in history. I can envision Story Squares about Watergate, American foreign policy, works of literature, movies, etc. The possibilities are endless.

The Story Squares have been found to be an interesting and effective way of probing students' linguistic limitations and helping them to expand the range of what they can express. Instead of being fed patterns of the teacher's choosing, students can use what language they have acquired to expand the borders of their knowledge in order to express what they want to communicate. Correct English comes as the solution to problems they have tried to solve themselves. Students come to view mistakes as interesting problems in communication from which they can learn, and tension about making mistakes usually

disappears after the first lesson with the Story Square. This problem-solving atmosphere usually facilitates group cohesiveness and group communication, with all students, even the advanced ones, being corrected in class. The result is a cooperative learning situation in which students help each other by monitoring each others' English.

The goal of the Story Square is to help enhance students' cooperative learning skills, to help them master basic grammar, and to improve their fluency. All of this is essential not only if they plan to work or study abroad, where they will constantly find themselves in the position of having to "solve" various problems as they encounter an innumerable range of situations, but also for anyone who will be using a foreign language as a means of communication.